
MOVING BEYOND THE OBVIOUS:

Examining Our Thinking About Linguistically Diverse Students





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Robert T. Jiménez
Vanderbilt University



1120 East Diehl Road, Suite 200
Naperville, IL 60563-1486
800-356-2735 630-649-6500
www.learningpt.org

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Introduction

The field of literacy has occupied my thoughts ever since I was a graduate student back in the 1980s. Questions I'm still asking myself include: Do we already know everything necessary to help every student become fully literate? Then, as counterpoint: Do we still have a lot left to learn about how best to help all students, especially young students, become literate? Perhaps most important for the purposes of this paper are these three still nagging questions:

- Do students from linguistically diverse backgrounds develop the kinds of literacy necessary to access the mainstream curriculum?
- What do we still need to learn about curriculum, assessment, and especially instruction to make these powerful and valuable forms of literacy available to linguistically diverse students?
- What sort of research is necessary to inform these decisions?
- Is the answer in more collaborative research in which teachers, administrators, researchers, parents and students work together?

As we consider these questions, we need to take into account that the make-up of the overall U.S. student population has experienced dramatic changes. Quite simply, our K-12 student body is far more culturally and linguistically diverse than it has ever been. In addition, these changes have been dramatic recently, as shown by consulting the website for the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (www.ncela.gwu.edu/policy/states/reports/statedata/2003LEP/GrowingLEP_0304.pdf) Here is seen that while total enrollments for all students in Grades K-12 have increased by a little more than 9.19 percent during the past 10 years, the rate of growth of English language learners (ELLs) has increased by about 65 percent. Florida and the entire Southwest host ELL populations that are now greater than 10 percent of their entire student enrollments. In the Southeast, some states, such as Tennessee, the Carolinas, and Georgia, are witnessing phenomenally high annual growth rates of ELLs of all ages: between 400 to more than 500 percent. (Individual state data are available at www.ncela.gwu.edu/policy/states/index.htm.) It seems clear that growth in education is most dramatic among ELLs that anyone going into teaching would do well to consider professional development in this area. In and of themselves, these changes in school populations require a rethinking of assumptions about literacy instruction across the board.

In the first section of this two part paper, I provide a very brief theoretical framework for thinking about content-area literacy instruction for ELLs. In the second section, I ask: What do effective teachers of linguistically diverse students know and do? This question is answered in five parts.

Part one focuses on content teachers whose classrooms I have visited and who teach ELLs. I highlight their instructional practices that have value for English learners but I focus on what effective teachers in general have in common with effective teachers of linguistically diverse students.

Part two, argues that effective literacy teachers of linguistically diverse students also think about the different meanings of and uses for literacy held by their students. This section focuses on the different meanings and uses for literacy held by many ELL students and what teachers can do to support their students' literacy development.

Part three points out that students coming to the United States from other countries may have very different ideas about what literacy is and how schools might address these differences.

Part four raises the issue of how important becoming literate in English is for these students and how their families often depend on them to take on very demanding roles. I make clear that the stakes are high for these students as they become or fail to become literate in English.

Part five discusses the need to challenge ELL students with high quality instruction while at the same time making sure they have opportunities to interact with native English speakers.

In my conclusion are brief but very specific instructional and curricular recommendations to teachers.

What Is Literacy?

For many, the idea of literacy begins and ends with the sorts of tasks associated with the kinds of reading and writing typically found in schools. David Barton (1994), however, tells us that literacy is a set of social practices associated with the written word. Social practices theory emphasizes the importance of historical, political and economic dimensions that influence the ways that we think about and participate in literacy events, as well as what we teach the next generation about literacy (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). In other words, literacy is much more than simply a set of activities. The ways that we think about and implement literacy, according to the theorists, actually has a part in creating the world that we live in and the world that we live in influences the kinds of literacy that we value and use.

Other theorists, such as Pierre Bourdieu (1998), tell us that individuals need to think carefully about different aspects of our lives within that social context and take nothing for granted, particularly if we want to make the kinds of progress associated with social mobility. In this case, progress involves more equitable distribution of literacy. We will only achieve more equitable distribution of literacy through serious consideration of larger societal forces, by thinking deeply about what happens in schools, and also, by identifying taken-for-granted views and ways of thinking about linguistically diverse populations. As Bourdieu puts it, we need to engage in:

The difficult and perhaps interminable work that is necessary to break with preconceptions and presuppositions – that is, with all theses that are never stated as such because they are inscribed in the *obviousness of ordinary experience*, within the substratum of the unthinkable that underlies the most vigilant thinking... (p. 36).

This suggests that, while teachers must think about the practical applications of instructional ideas to their teaching tasks and challenges, we also need to analyze critically our basic assumptions about teaching in classrooms of students with a wide range of literacy. To do this, it's useful to think about what Bourdieu calls *the obviousness of ordinary experience*. For many of us, literacy is a very straightforward and uncomplicated set of skills and understandings. So much so that we think we ought to be able to package and dispense “literacy” without any serious difficulty. However, as we are all aware, we haven't been completely successful helping all students become literate. Literacy is differentially distributed throughout society and is correlated with factors such as socioeconomic background, race, ethnicity, gender and ability. This apparent correlation between literacy and background characteristics has become part of the obviousness of our experience. That is, many simply accept the notion that differences in background characteristics cause problems with academic achievement and literacy learning. But, in order to provide better instruction for English learners of all backgrounds we need to question these taken-for-granted aspects of literacy.

Earlier I asked if we already knew everything we need to know to make sure all students become literate. I would argue that an unqualified ‘yes’ to this question supports the rationale behind current legislation like No Child Left Behind. And yet, even the federal government recognizes that a lot of progress needs to be made before every child, no matter what that child's background, leaves our public schools with their literacy skills solidly in place. So, let me modify my first question a little: What do we already know that we can use to help linguistically diverse students become literate, especially in ways necessary to access the mainstream curriculum?

What Do Effective Literacy Teachers of Linguistically Diverse Students Need to Know and Do?

Recently I've been involved in a nationwide project with several other literacy researchers. We were asked to identify effective literacy teachers in Grades 3 through 5 and to describe what these teachers do. The website www.learner.org/resources/series204.html includes video portrayals of many of the examples I discuss here. I should point out that the material that follows focuses primarily on school forms of literacy, not surprising since for this work we observed teachers recommended for their effectiveness. While these ways of using and thinking about written language fall within what has been described as a "cognitive" approach to literacy, *they represent what we found rather than what could be*. Still, school forms of literacy are extremely important within the world in which we live. So, in response to my question of what do we already know that we can use to help linguistically diverse students become literate, I would answer, for starters: *Effective literacy teachers of linguistically diverse students need to know virtually everything that effective literacy teachers know*.

Their knowledge of effective literacy teaching encompasses the three major areas discussed below: knowledge of best practices in writing, an understanding of how to foster reading comprehension, and a solid grasp of children's literature.

Effective Literacy Teachers Provide Challenging and Substantive Writing Instruction as On-Going Opportunities to Write in Their Classrooms

- They have a well-developed sense and understanding of the various stages writers go through as they create a document.

These teachers understand what students need to learn about writing. They display a great deal of information about the process of writing on charts and posters in their rooms. For example, some of the teachers we observed directed their students to place markers on each stage of the writing process in which the students were engaged as the teachers guided their students through pre-writing, drafting, getting feedback, revision, editing, and publishing of their work.

- They have a thoughtful and well-crafted sense of how instruction can promote better writing.

We observed that these teachers demonstrate and model what they wanted their students to attempt in their writing. One teacher contrasted the statement, "she was happy" with a shout and a jump into the air. First, he asked students to orally describe as precisely as possible what he had just done. He then wrote students' descriptions on a sheet of butcher paper and engaged his class in a discussion of the differences between ways to show and tell readers what a character did. Another teacher led her students in an exercise of "cracking open" bland words like good, nice, or bad and replacing them with more descriptive words like proper, tantalizing, and wicked. The example of "I was really, really nervous," was compared and contrasted with "... the words strangled in my throat."

- They provide their students with concrete and practical means to conduct research.

One teacher, for example, directed her students to take notes on the ideas and information they found in informational materials. She then had them sort this information into envelopes with category names. This activity helped students to organize their research and to begin to build frameworks for their writing, so, the students' categories became or suggested the main headings for their outlines. The teacher also pushed them to restate ideas in their own words, so that they would "put their own special twist" on the ideas of others. Restating or paraphrasing ideas is critical for the process of report writing, but the ability to do this and how to accomplish it are anything but simple. For students learning English as a second language (ESL), "putting ideas into your own words" can be even more difficult because of their struggles to acquire a useful and broad vocabulary in the new language.

- They use journal writing, quick write activities, reading logs, and more formal writing genres like report writing, to implement writing across the curriculum.

An indicator of just how important writing was in these teachers' classrooms is that students write quite frequently. The teachers designed these activities to support and extend other activities like students' independent reading. The teachers engaged their students in a variety of writing activities to help them build writing fluency. Further, the teachers provided their students with multiple opportunities to learn about writing conventions such as the mechanics of writing, higher order concerns like organization, and how best to present their ideas.

Effective Literacy Teachers Provide Their Students With Effective Reading Comprehension Instruction

- They pose big questions to their students such as, "What is reading?"

The issue of posing big questions engages students intellectually and provides motivation to work on activities they may not initially understand. Asking such umbrella questions propel teachers and students into conversations about the meanings and purposes of different literacy practices. They also provide a platform for teachers to hear and listen to students as they consider how literacy impacts their lives outside of school. Astute teachers use these big questions to go to find out how students interact with and make use of literacy in their daily lives. I detail below what some nonschool literacy practices look like. Once students clearly demonstrate a grasp of the big picture, their teachers can focus on the finer details, the exceptions, and the procedures necessary to acquire the various components involved in activities like reading comprehension.

- They have a mental map in their heads about what good instruction looks like.

For the effective literacy teachers we observed, this map often appeared to include having the teacher model, share, and guide various small- and large-group activities, and have students do independent work. Of course, there are other organizational schemes that are just as useful, but this set of instructional components is well known and is recognizable by many in the field. By keeping these components in mind, these teachers made sure that their students are provided with multiple access points to new information and necessary skills. Teachers demonstrated what they

want students to learn, then they had students work in pairs or in small groups to share their knowledge with each other. Teachers also guided students while they worked on new ideas. Finally students worked independently. As they led students through these different phases of learning, teachers helped students greatly improve their superficial acquaintance with new information and complex literacy skills, making both far more accessible. In essence, students got acquainted with new information and procedures from different vantage points which gave them a deeper understanding of complex ideas and information.

- They model their own thinking by talking through comprehension problems.

These teachers thought aloud to help students hear and see what was necessary to achieve comprehension of new materials and ideas. They provided multiple examples, explicitly identified useful strategies, and got students to share their thinking in small groups. They made reading strategies concrete and visible by showing how background information and textual information are combined when drawing conclusions or making inferences. For example, we saw a teacher take a photocopied textual excerpt from a content-area textbook and physically highlight ideas in the text while writing down her own thoughts and ideas on butcher paper. She then went through the process of showing students how she combined information from the text with her own background information to draw conclusions.

- They use a wide variety of formats.

Teachers used a variety of formats such as choral reading and individual silent reading: They read aloud to students, ask their students to read in pairs, and listen to students read orally one at a time, to make sure that their students had multiple opportunities to read and practice their reading fluency and word recognition abilities. Use of different formats provide students with more time to practice their oral reading, so when they listened to students read individually while the rest of the class engaged in other activities, these teachers kept track of their students' oral reading abilities by keeping running records. A special concern when working with English-learning students involves confusing fluent oral reading with comprehension. Such confusion can be especially detrimental to ELL learners who often struggle with issues of pronunciation. In other words, unlike native English speakers, fluent oral reading is not always an indication of comprehension for English learners, nor is problems with oral reading a completely reliable indicator that they are unable to comprehend what they read. A good technique for checking students' comprehension is to engage them in discussions where they are able to discuss English-language texts in their native language. Luis Moll and Stephen Diaz (1987) describe this technique in much greater detail.

- Effective literacy teachers articulate the need to create students who are passionate readers, people who love to read.

These teachers understood that equal in importance to the skill and knowledge of reading comprehension is encouraging a need to read. Students will not read unless they have experienced the pleasures of reading. Helping students achieve and experience these pleasures requires that this goal be explicitly identified so that materials, activities, and opportunities can be designed to achieve it. Helping students become passionate readers requires the teacher to

move beyond a view of literacy as something that exists primarily within individuals—limited to that which is inside their heads—to a view of literacy as something shared by a community. Students need to be active participants as others demonstrate how written language touches their hearts, stimulates their thinking, persuades them to review their assumptions, and helps them achieve their desires. Examples of how to do this might include, “I just read an on-line newspaper story in which scientists found actual soft tissue from a tyrannosaurus rex. Do you think they might be able to use this material to recreate a dinosaur?” Or, “scientists have just discovered a planet within the orbit of three different stars. Do you think that life could develop on such a world?”

- They routinely and actively teach vocabulary.

Learning new vocabulary is crucial to ELLs because new words pay big dividends to students new to the language. Further, it’s an access point to comprehension, a resource that is both social and academic. In fact, vocabulary is an area of learning that these students themselves recognize as important to success in school. A focus on vocabulary is especially important for content area reading. Teachers who recognized the importance of vocabulary learning for ELLs provided them with multiple exposures to key words. They emphasized meaning while making sure students saw the words and, incidentally, took note of orthography. In their classrooms, students demonstrated their comprehension by acting out the meanings of words. Also they read words chorally and considered antonyms and synonyms of focus words. Their teachers also encouraged them to build networks of meanings for new words. They did this as they created graphic representations of semantic networks. The new words were displayed on posters on classroom walls, often in conceptually related groups. Students also created and maintained records of their new words and their definitions by creating personal dictionaries.

- Effective literacy teachers take time to explore and explain idiomatic expressions.

Similar to helping their students with vocabulary, these teachers paid special attention to their students’ need for extra support with unusual English expressions. For example, phrases like “she was a slip of a girl” and the “merest glance was like a flash of lightening,” and “brushing my cheek” were selected by the teachers we observed for discussion. While these phrases might not cause as much trouble to a native-English speaker, they can be quite a challenge to someone new to the language. Students need to have strategies in place for monitoring their current state of comprehension, in fact, a repertoire of strategies for thinking about what these expressions might mean. They need to consider literal and then metaphorical meanings. They need to make educated guesses grounded in the overall context of a phrase. They need to draw on what they already know and ask questions to determine what these phrases might signify.

Effective Literacy Teachers Build Enticing, Intriguing, and Relevant Classroom Libraries

- They gather a variety of books—fiction and nonfiction— from as many sources as they can.

What matters most here is that these teachers created classroom libraries that are bursting with books. They collected these books through every possible means available to them such as fund raisers, grant-writing, garage sales, book-club promotions, and more. Of course, this is something they pursued as an on-going activity, over long periods of time. Novice teachers need extra support to amass a substantial library. Ideally, this help should be provided by more experienced teachers, administrators and school librarians, as well as the PTA and parent volunteers.

- They know a lot about children's literature in general and about children's grade-level appropriate literature in particular.

These teachers drew upon a wide range of resources to build their knowledge of children's literature. These resources included reading as much of the literature themselves as possible, coursework in children's and young adult literature, and regular perusal of journals and other publications that describe and review children's books. Of course, staying in touch with the school librarian and other teachers also contributed to their knowledge of children's literature.

- They expect and encourage students to think about the similarities and connections between different books.

These teachers regularly asked their students to compare and contrast books they were reading with those that had been presented in the classroom previously. These comparisons helped students to begin thinking about printed language as a web of information that is linked to everything else rather than viewing it as simply discrete factoids. By pushing students to think about books and other materials in this way, students developed analytical skills and higher order thinking abilities that will help them succeed as they move through the school system.

- They make books available that feature characters from diverse backgrounds.

Some of the teachers we observed made sure that the books in their classrooms represented characters from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. These teachers understood that although students can be helped to identify with characters from all sorts of backgrounds, the process can be achieved much more quickly when students are able to explicitly relate their experiences with those of the protagonists. By linking their backgrounds and experiences to those described in stories and other materials, students' reasoning, drawing of conclusions, and ultimate comprehension is enhanced and understood at deeper levels than it might be otherwise. Of course, students can also connect with characters that are quite different from them if the characters experience situations that intrigue or interest them.

- They consciously and specifically include books in different languages as well as bilingual books for ELLs.

We noticed that in classrooms where ELLs were present, effective literacy teachers made sure their students had access to books in languages other than English. These books were written in students' languages and at times they included side-by-side translations of material. The most informed teachers worked to find materials written by members of the community represented by

their students: They sought books that provided accurate portrayals of members of diverse communities, and they looked for books that were originally written in students' languages rather than simply translations of books first written in English. Of special note to teachers interested in promoting their students content-area knowledge, is that the books that supplement curricular information with material written in students' first languages can be used to build student background knowledge about different topics.

Up to now, I have focused my discussion on the ways that effective literacy teachers of linguistically diverse students resemble their mainstream counterparts. Next I focus attention on some key *differences* between effective teachers of mainstream students and those who work with linguistically diverse students.

Effective Literacy Teachers of ELLs Think About Their Students Different Meanings and Uses for Literacy

- These teachers understand that their students want to be literate and need to be literate to contribute to the needs of their families.

In recent research (Jiménez, 2000), I found that preadolescent and young adolescent Latino students indicated that they view particular forms of literacy, especially nonschool literacies, as highly necessary and desirable because their parents often depended on them for help to negotiate the demands of English language literacy. The students served as language brokers by helping their parents translate documents such as rental/lease agreements, income tax forms, and other commercial transactions such as telephone or power bills. Many English learners take these responsibilities seriously and view the help they provide to their parents and other family members as their contribution to the overall well being of the family. In addition, parents and other adult family members may depend on these minors for oral translation in stressful, fast-paced interactions such as purchasing a vehicle or returning merchandise at a retail establishment.

An important question for teachers and researchers is how can we build on out-of-school literacies like language brokering so that ELLs receive the benefits associated with their practice? We know that mainstream, middle-class forms of literacy, such as storybook reading and certain types of written expression such as play writing, dovetail nicely with reading and writing instruction in the beginning grades (Heath, 1983; Sulzby & Teale, 1991, Wells, 1986). It stands to reason that other literacies, like language brokering, could also pay dividends if we would find ways to recognize them, support them, and integrate them into our curricula.

I propose that the literacies brought into the schools by many English learners are at least as complex and demanding as those practiced by their middle-class, European-American counterparts. In the following example, Gil discusses the intricacies of "language brokering." Language brokering refers to the work that the children of immigrants perform to help their parents and other significant adults in their lives understand both spoken and written forms of English. Compare this activity, so familiar to Gil and many other English learners, with your own understanding of the ways that mainstream students make use of literacy.

Gil:... tienen algo que esta en el libro y si, este, no sé leer, pues, como le voy a entender, y cuando te dan como así... algo que tienes que pagar... y no tienen números y solamente así como en letras... y no vas a saber que vas a pagar. [... They have something that is in the book and if, uh, I don't know how to read, well, how am I going to understand it... and when they give you something like that... something that you have to pay... and it doesn't have numbers and it only has it like that in letters... and you are not going to know what you are going to pay.]

Notice that Gil understands and appreciates the power of literacy, not only for its own sake but also because of the real world consequences of paying or not paying bills. These consequences might mean the difference between having or not having a place to live or phone service. The teachers' understanding of this value of literacy to English learners and their families, both in English and another language, should result in instructional methods and curriculum that are more relevant to the needs and desires of these students. These research findings also suggest why conventional literacy programs are often so ineffective for ELLs. These programs were not created with these populations in mind because their creators made assumptions about students and their lives that may not be accurate.

- Effective ESL teachers know that literacy is an important part of who each of us is, taking care to communicate that becoming literate in English does not mean students should abandon important aspects of their identities (e.g., Spanish or Chinese speaker, member of specific communities).

In the same research study as that referred to above (Jiménez, 2000), I worked with students who indicated the importance of their identity with respect to literacy. For example, in the following quote, a Grade 4 student I called Petra explained how her status as the child of immigrants who had been born in the United States had affected and changed her. Notice how she positioned herself in contradistinction to both native, monolingual English speakers and her own family members. Also, notice how my question did not anticipate that Petra would share aspects of her identity with me:

Interviewer: *Bueno, ponte a pensar. ¿Cómo es diferente leer en inglés que leer en español?* [Well, think about it. How is it different reading in English than reading in Spanish?]

Petra: *Pues, como yo soy, yo nací aquí, y soy de padres mexicanos era difícil para mi aprender el inglés, es una diferencia que nos cambia porque en inglés hay palabras que uno no entiende y en español, como yo soy española, son mas así las en español que en inglés.* [Well, since I am, I was born here, and I am from Mexican parents it's difficult for me to learn English. It's a difference that changes us because in English there are words that one does not understand, and in Spanish, well, since I am Spanish there are more like that in Spanish than in English.]

Perhaps one of the conclusions that might be drawn concerning these students' emerging understanding of their identities, was that they were a bit unsure and insecure about who they were. The fragility of their sense of self surfaced on occasion when students mentioned that

English might supplant Spanish and when they hinted that literacy development itself was a language-specific activity, forcing a choice between Spanish and English. Similar comments by Petra indicate a bit of this ambivalence toward both English language learning and its relationship to literacy. Christopher made the most telling comment in the following excerpt: Forgetting to read in Spanish and forgetting the Spanish language altogether, was not only something these children feared, it was a reality that some had observed in their own families. These apprehensions are also experienced by individuals from Asian and other language backgrounds.

Interviewer: When you read in English, Christopher, does it help that you know how to read in Spanish?

Christopher: No.

Interviewer: It doesn't? Not at all? Ok. That's possible. Umm, do you think, does it cause problems?

Christopher: It does. You can forget to read in Spanish.

These data confirmed for me how important it is for teachers and program designers to take care to appreciate the influence of identity as we plan literacy instruction and choose curriculum because students from linguistically diverse populations are especially vulnerable to feelings of being marginalized and excluded. Sadly, many of these students receive explicit messages that their cultures and languages are not welcome in the schools or in the larger society. These problems are not just interesting phenomena but create barriers to learning that can and should be actively resisted. Christopher should not have drawn the conclusion that becoming literate in English meant that he might cease to be literate in Spanish. After all, how many individuals from mainstream backgrounds, given a choice of either maintaining English language proficiency and literacy or losing that to develop language and literacy in another language, would choose the latter? Besides, linguistically diverse students need to be encouraged to think about how literacy in other languages contributes to English literacy and to appreciate the advantages of biliteracy.

Effective Literacy Teachers of ELLs Believe That All of Their Students Possess the Necessary Background, Language, and Cultural Knowledge to Become Fully Literate

- They understand that the ways of thinking about literacy and the uses of literacy may differ in other traditions and that each culture's may be distinctive, even unique.

A few years ago, some colleagues and I conducted a study of the literacy instruction provided in Mexican schools (Jiménez, Smith, & Martínez-León, 2003). We were impressed by the amount and nature of attention that teachers and students gave to the production of written work and how relatively little attention was paid to reading. In particular, the appearance and form of all written work of both the students and teachers, was often nearly faultless in terms of its approximation to conventional forms. In addition, all of the teacher-produced posters that displayed lists of exhortations, rules, and suggestions for behavior followed the same patterns of neatness and

conventionality. Student work was not displayed publicly. When teachers provided students with models of written work, they were extremely careful to make sure that words were spelled correctly and that they included all necessary accompanying diacritics and punctuation. Students were expected to mimic these forms. As one of the teachers explained to us:

As far as writing goes our goal is that the child achieves success in writing with good handwriting, has good spelling, and maintains his or her notebook in good condition. That is starting with the *forro* [plastic book cover], that he/she brings it neatly done, that he/she brings it with all the notes in order. Yes, that he/she writes with good handwriting and without spelling mistakes, it's all of that, that the titles are underlined in red. That's included, let's just say, in what we call writing.

This teacher, who we called Andrea, speaks in “general cultural ways” (Barton & Hamilton, 2000) about writing. Her comments reflected a shared understanding of the role teachers in Mexican schools were expected to play in teaching children to write. She foregrounds the appearance of the children’s work, an idea that is omnipresent in Mexican discussions of writing in general (Peña de García, 2002; De la Garza, 2002). Peña de García (2002), a self-declared expert on writing, states unequivocally that “children who do not learn to spell correctly will not have access to good jobs and salaries” (back cover). Perhaps most important, we rarely observed that students authored their own texts. Rather, teachers provided students with detailed instructions concerning the content and form of their written work. I would argue that teachers and other educators in the United States need to understand these different “taken for granted” views of written language. Educators can learn about these different perspectives by engaging students’ parents in discussions of what reading and writing instruction look like in different countries. These conversations will almost certainly provide useful understanding to both parents and teachers. This understanding could then be used to facilitate communication between linguistically diverse schools and communities.

Effective Teachers of ELLs Understand That Their Students Need to Access Their Own Linguistic and Cultural Strengths to Become Fully Literate

- These teachers encourage and facilitate students to recognize the benefits of instruction that helps students become strategic translators, users of cognate-vocabulary relationships (words that are very similar across languages like *picante* and *piquant*) and to appreciate how such linguistic resources give them an understanding of how to make maximum use of their bilingualism and biculturalism.

In previous research, my colleagues and I documented that successful bilingual readers consciously transferred information across their two languages (Jiménez, García, & Pearson, 1995). In other words, when they are reading a text in English about the solar system, they would consciously and specifically recall having read Spanish-language text that covered the same or a similar topic. In contrast, low- and average-performing bilingual students have much greater difficulty knowing when and how to make connections between their two languages. In fact, they appear to view the two languages as mutually exclusive and even antagonistic systems (Jiménez, García, & Pearson, 1996). These stances toward unilingual literacy may have been instructionally induced by an educational system that does not understand, value, or incorporate

the advantages of bilingualism into the curriculum. Far too often, the prevailing view of English learners casts them as defective versions of their mainstream counterparts. This fails to recognize the value and power of their linguistic resources and the many effective instructional ways these might be used to facilitate learning a second language.

I took the findings of my earlier research—which documented and catalogued the cognitive and metacognitive strategies of competent and less competent bilingual Latino students—and taught some of this information to much lower performing Latino students, students in bilingual special-education settings and what their school called a bilingual at-risk classroom. One of my findings was that these middle-school students, who were all performing at least 3 grade levels behind their expected level, responded quite favorably to instruction that emphasized a bilingual approach to processing text (Jiménez, 1997). That is, these students were more than willing to try out a searching-for-cognate-vocabulary strategy, a translating strategy, and strategies designed to facilitate the integration of their prior knowledge and experience with information found in the texts. The following example shows how a successful bilingual Latina reader actively used her knowledge of Spanish to improve her comprehension when reading in English:

Pamela: Like “carnivorous,” “*carnívoro*.” OK, some [words] like I know what it is in Spanish. Some words I go, what does that mean in Spanish?

I argued that these strategies were desirable to these students because they were derived from their community, from other bilingual Latino students. I speculated that they were able to intuitively understand and appreciate the benefits that accrued from establishing linkages between their two languages. I also concluded that they found this approach an affirmation of their bilingual, bicultural identity. Possibly, the prevailing stereotypes about Latino students, their families, and their communities prevent many educators from seeing these students’ full academic potential—one of the damaging aspects of that obviousness of ordinary experience. One especially pernicious stereotype held by many is that minority students’ knowledge of any non-English language is harmful and potentially confusing to them. This serves as an almost unspoken excuse for ignoring that student-knowledge resource.

Effective Teachers of ELLs Understand That Their Students Need Access to a Powerful, Undiluted Curriculum as Well as to Native Speakers of English

- Effective teachers of ELLs do not water down the curriculum: They provide students with what they need to know to do well on assessments as well as at the next level of schooling.
- Although effective ESL teachers do not repress or deny their students the right to use their native language, they make sure that their students interact with other native speakers of English: This contact is necessary to become fully fluent in a new language.
- Students need to develop images of themselves as central to the mission of their respective schools, not peripheral or marginal.

This instruction needs to be tied to age-appropriate content learning and a rigorous curriculum. This is something that immigrant parents want and that English learners expect. These students come highly motivated to learn English but they often become disillusioned. How many opportunities to learn English do ELLs really have? How thoughtfully is ESL instruction tied to the mainstream curriculum? One could point out that there is a major difference between the kind of English necessary to succeed in everyday conversation and that needed to make progress in age-appropriate curriculum. The bilingual education theorist, James Cummins (2000), has done precisely that, but from recent work in this area, I think the problem may be even larger than imagined. Researchers like Guadalupe Valdés (2001) and Bonnie Norton (2000) have provided evidence that native-English speakers often refuse to engage in meaningful exchanges with ELLs. In other words, the power differences that exist between groups are exercised in ways that disadvantages students who wish to learn English. So, not only is the quality of instruction provided to English learners an issue, but opportunities for interaction with native-English speakers need to be considered when educators evaluate their programs. Can these students be blamed for struggling with English when the teacher is the only contact they have with the English-speaking world? What would careful examination of the language interactions of English learners in your school reveal concerning the amount and quality of language input and opportunities for language production? What kinds of organizational structures would provide your English learners with more access to native English speakers?

Schools and school districts have it within their power to structure more interaction between ELLs and native-English speakers. Multiple schemes for cooperative learning have been demonstrated to be effective in increasing student achievement and also, to increasing social interaction. Finding ways to get students to listen and talk to each other, to read each other's writing, and to write to one another are all well within the scope of what schools should be doing regardless of the populations they serve. A few bilingual-education-program designs such as dual language immersion provide highly structured opportunities for native-English speakers to interact with English language learners. The design ideally calls for a mix of approximately 50 percent native-English speakers and 50 percent English language learners (Lindholm-Leary, 2001). The underlying idea is that each group engages in the process of learning one another's language. Such an arrangement results in instruction that is evenly split between the use of English and use of a non-English language, in this case Spanish (alternating days, weeks, or even semesters have been used). Research has shown that these programs can be very effective for both ELLs and mainstream students.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Language brokering, both oral and literate, should be formally recognized as a legitimate and commendable activity. Students can be provided with instruction that helps them to complete these tasks successfully. Teachers may want to investigate how many of their students are involved in these activities, their feelings about them, and what they feel would help them to be better at it so that instructional activities could be designed accordingly.

Oral and literate bilingual abilities ought to be promoted and encouraged because students need these skills to successfully manage their lives. Business people from the local area could be invited into the school to discuss the ways that both English and other languages are used in their work, and valued in their employees. Alternately, students could visit local businesses and note how written English and other languages are used in restaurants, travel agencies, beauty salons, and grocery stores.

Other literate activities that are of unique interest to ELLs need to be encouraged and included in the curriculum. These activities should include ideas that students can use to facilitate younger siblings and older family members' literacy. Just as many schools recognize and reward out-of-school story-book reading, the same practice could be extended to reading with younger siblings, participating in letter writing to family members abroad or in another state, and other activities yet to be discovered at the local-school level. Teachers might also want to investigate whether students are aware of other ways that literacy is employed in their homes and communities. For example, ask students to document all the written language found on storefronts in their neighborhood. What languages are represented? What forms do the messages take?

In the recommendations that follow, I encourage teachers to acknowledge explicitly all of the knowledge and experience their ELLs bring to the classroom. Such use of transfer strategies supports and scaffolds students' learning and help them to make maximum use of what they already know.

- Educators who wish to be inclusive and supportive of their English learners need to make special efforts to understand and consider the unique challenges facing, and special talents possessed by, bilingual students. For example, these teachers know that successful *bilingual* readers use the following strategies:
 - ⊙ Approaching unknown vocabulary through the use of contextual clues, looking for cognate relationships (related words across languages), and the approximate pronunciations of words
 - ⊙ Asking questions that allow overt comprehension monitoring
 - ⊙ Making inferences using strategies, including bilingual language abilities, such as the integration of prior knowledge with information found in print. When less successful bilingual students are taught these strategies, they soon improve.
- These educators also obtain and examine their students' prior educational histories in order to better guide their instructional efforts. Students from rural backgrounds in their country of origin, for example, may need more intensive literacy instruction than students coming from an urban experiences in their home countries.

- Students who are recent immigrants and who have had minimal prior schooling, need to be provided with an appropriate entry-level literacy program. Such a program mixes and matches characteristics of those used with young children and those used in adult literacy programs. The guiding principle is to challenge the student with as many age appropriate materials as possible while still making sure that they don't struggle unnecessarily, so that success is within their grasp.
- Many ELLs at the intermediate- and middle-school levels still need help with word identification skills and reading fluency. Their needs may be similar to those of younger students but age-appropriate materials are necessary. This researcher also found that struggling Latino readers at the middle-school level responded well to culturally familiar and linguistically sensitive texts, and literacy instruction that emphasized choral and repeated reading.
- Students need to be encouraged to view their dual language abilities as a strength. One way to do this is to show them how to make connections across and between their two languages by identifying cognate vocabulary, judicious use of translation, and the transfer of information learned in their first language.
- Students need to be taught explicitly how to overcome comprehension problems associated with second-language learning. Typical comprehension problems for second language readers include encountering a disproportionately high number of unknown words, idiomatic expressions, and texts for which they lack the necessary background knowledge for comprehension. This is often successfully dealt with when teachers model the think-aloud procedure for their students, which involves reading text out loud line by line, and then thinking aloud as the teacher handles the associated comprehension problems. For example, "isn't it interesting that in this story by Sandra Cisneros, the father is going to Mexico. I remember when that happened in my family. My grandfather, who lived in Mexico, died and my dad had to get on a plane and go to the funeral." Examples like this help students to see how an expert reader connects information in the text to her own life.
- Students need to be explicitly helped with those reading strategies that have been shown to promote the comprehension of readers in general. These strategies include rereading, self-monitoring of comprehension, using background knowledge appropriately, drawing inferences, and asking questions and finding answers. An example showing how this researcher taught middle-school students to ask questions follows:

Sara: Quetzalcoatl wanted very much to help the people that he loved.

Researcher: OK. What's your question now, what kind of question would you ask yourself? He wants very much to help the people that he loves so you wonder, well....

Sara: Is it gonna happen or not?

The same middle-school student, Sara, commented that although she had up until then disliked reading, by the end of 10 lessons emphasizing the approach described in this article, she now "kind of liked it because it makes a little more sense now and I can read better."

One possibility for combining the strengths that ELLs bring with them into U.S. schools with their need to acquire content-area information is to have students work in systematic ways to translate key portions of text. Teachers select those parts of the curriculum that are essential in terms of their information and then students are shown how to translate the supplied English text into their native tongue. If the teacher does not speak the student's language, this is a great opportunity for her to learn some of it through collaboration with the students. The teacher should select information-rich statements from the text and ask students to develop translations on their own and in collaboration with one another. Students can then write their translations on the board or some other means of public display so that the entire class can view it and critique it. This process should continue until they produce a satisfactory rendition.

Once students understand what is involved in translation, they can be asked to work on larger portions of text, up to a paragraph or two. They should translate first on an individual level. A time limit should be set that allows enough time for students to translate as much as possible on their own. Students can then move into small groups and compare their translations with those of their peers. They should discuss differences and consider why different students assumed different forms for the English text which affected their translation. Students then collaborate on the best "school-like" rendition of the passage. These translations can, over time, be collected by the teacher and used as examples for future students who would then be asked to translate other portions of the text. Teachers might also ask students to create different versions of the text translation, such as forms that would be most recognizable to their families or parents. As an additional activity, students could take particularly meaningful translated passages home and solicit their parents' responses to the material. Especially interesting in this regard would be to ask parents how such material compares with the texts they encountered as students. If parents have limited educational backgrounds, students can simply ask them what they think about the material. Such an activity would create opportunities for parents to interact with their children and allow them to become informed about what is happening at school. Students could be asked to record their parents' responses and bring these into school to share with the class.

This activity allows students to focus deeply on content-area information. Students will be able to process the information in a way that differs substantially from what is often a quick pass through dense text. A translation approach will, of necessity, force teachers to decide what constitutes the core of the curriculum because this approach requires students to do more with less text than is typical in many content-area classes. In addition, students will get practice learning the kinds of English that are used for content-area material. However, then specialized vocabulary and terms ought need to be given priority so that students are clear about their meanings and how those meanings change depending on the context. Finally, students will benefit from the opportunity to hear what their peers are thinking about the material and about the language used to convey that information. The peer-mediated content-area translation activity needs to be tested in real classrooms with actual English learners but its promise seems significant.

English learners could also be asked to translate key parts of those texts into English, if the teacher can find relevant content-area material in students' native languages, or arranging to have the selected text translated by a fluently bilingual native speaker, whether Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Tagalog, Hindi, Vietnamese, or what-have-you. Following the same procedures above,

students could then share their English language translations with native-English-speaking students and thus engage in authentic language interactions with speakers of English. Both groups of students would benefit as they focus their attention on content-area text in authentic communication interactions. These are just a few possibilities for engaging English learners in more intensive content-area learning experiences as well as more intensive language learning opportunities.

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1120 East Diehl Road, Suite 200
Naperville, IL 60563-1486
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